

### **Excursus: Is the Bible Reliable?**

How can I trust that what was written down in the Bible is reliable?

If you could not be present, what factors would you find helpful to establish the truth of an event today?

#### **Eyewitness and Witness Records**

It would help if someone who was there wrote down a recollection of the event – of what they saw and heard. In fact, it would be even more helpful if several people wrote down a recollection of that event.

At a simple level, that is what we have with the Gospels – the eyewitness accounts about Jesus at the beginning of the New Testament. Some who were there wrote down what they saw and heard - like Matthew (who wrote the gospel of Matthew), and John (who wrote the gospel of John). On top of those, we also have others who got to write down what they heard from those who were there – like Mark (who wrote the gospel of Mark and who was the likely scribe for Peter who was there), and Luke (who wrote the gospel of Luke after interviewing many who saw and heard Jesus). With the Gospels, we have the eyewitness and attested witness accounts of Jesus.

#### **Copies of Eyewitness and Witness Records**

What else would help? Further to those written eyewitness records, it would help if those accounts were carefully copied, many times. The fact that many people take those important written recollections and copy them multiple times adds to the historical reliability of the original event. The presence of *many* copies tells you something of the importance of the original event. And the presence of copies *in different languages* tells you something of the significance and influence of the original event.

When you have many copies you also have the ability to check for error in transmission. Whenever something is copied error could be made, but with many copies, you can compare them and see clearly whether errors have been introduced or not (i.e. if four copies say one thing and a fifth contains a difference, it is likely the fifth is in error).

When it comes to scripture, be it the Old or New Testaments, there are multiple copies of the original documents to compare. Speaking just of the New Testament accounts, literary scholar Bruce Metzger in an interview with investigative journalist Lee Strobel said this:

‘We have what are called uncial manuscripts, which are written in all-capital Greek letters. Today we have 306 of these, several dating back as early as the third century. A new style of writing, more cursive in nature emerged in roughly A.D. 800. It is called a minuscule and we have 2,856 of these manuscripts. Then there are also lectionaries,

which contain New Testament Scripture in the sequence it was to be read in the early churches at appropriate times during the year. A total of 2,403 of these have been catalogued. That puts the grand total of Greek Manuscripts at 5,664.<sup>1</sup>

Strobal then recounts an additional piece of information that Metzger offered:

‘In addition to the Greek documents, he said, there are thousands of other ancient New Testament manuscripts in other languages. There are 8,000 to 10,000 Latin Vulgate manuscripts, plus a total of 8,000 in Ethiopic, Slavic, and Armenian. In all, there are about 24,000 manuscripts in existence’<sup>2</sup>

In the Introduction of the *Greek New Testament* it helpfully provides the total list of manuscripts, with what they record of the New Testament (be it a Gospel, Acts, General Epistle, Pauline Epistle or Revelation), their storage location in the world, and their attested date. The Papyrus, Uncials, Minuscules, Lectionaries and Language versions are all listed.<sup>3</sup>

### **Testing the Eyewitness and Witness Records**

What other factors would help you establish the truth of an event? It would help if the written accounts could be tested.

The passage of time should not make the witnessed recollection of an event any less reliable although it is not uncommon for someone to assert that because something is old it becomes superseded (my grandmother would have a problem with that!).

On the contrary, the passage of time can often help sure up the reliability of those written down witness recollections. We live in an age when we can reliably examine and carbon date the copies which we have. For example, we can look at each manuscript and compare the hand writing consistencies, the quality of the ink used, the age of the paper or scroll – and if they match up they should all point to the same time period which in turn shows the document to be authentic (or not).

With the attested date of the manuscript, it is then possible to consider the time gaps between the original event or document and the copy that survives. Testing the documents is helpful.

The earliest Gospel Manuscript in existence is dated around A.D. 125 which means this copy is only 92 years after the original event (taking the date of Jesus death in A.D. 33). There are other Papyri which are dated around A.D. 200 (4 manuscripts), in the second century (1

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<sup>1</sup> Strobel, L., *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 81.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>3</sup> Aland, B., Aland K., Karavidopoulos, J., Martini, C.M., Metzger, B.M. (eds.), *The Greek New Testament* (4<sup>th</sup> Ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1998), 1-29.

manuscript), in the third century (30 manuscripts), in the fourth century (22 manuscripts), in the fifth century (8 manuscripts), in the sixth century (14 manuscripts), in the seventh century (13 manuscripts) and in the eighth century (2 manuscripts). That means that there are 95 New Testament manuscripts dated less than 800 years after the actual events.

If you think that is a lot, then compare that to the next most reliable ancient document in history - Homer's *Iliad* composed about B.C. 800 of which there are only 643 copies. The oldest surviving fragments of the *Iliad* are dated approximately in the second and third centuries – a gap of 900 to 1000 years.

### **External Sources**

Any other factors that may help establish the truth of an event? Yes, how about other sources (friendly or not) which could attest to the truth of the original event? This could be other articles that make mention, or material evidence, or circumstantial connections that help establish date or personnel involved.

For example, looking at coins, artworks, architecture, histories, novels, newspaper clippings, court reports and the like can often testify to people or concerns of an early time even if the topic of those items might be something or someone else.

In the case of the New Testament there is a wealth of helpful external source material – no novels or newspaper clippings but plenty of surviving material from the time prior, during and following the life of Jesus. It is helpful that there is much evidence mentioning people or events present around the time of Jesus. For example, coins bearing the face of Caesar Augustus (called Octavian) who was in power at the time of Jesus birth (c.f. Luke 2:1) and Caesar Tiberius who lived at the time of Jesus death (c.f. Luke 3:1). There are historical writings such as those from Josephus (a Jewish historian) who wrote much about the people, issues, politics and geography of the time of Jesus.

It is even more helpful that there are external sources who mention Jesus himself – not because they believed or followed him, but because he was a historical figure of the time that they wrote about. Josephus in his *Antiquities of the Jews* names Jesus, mentions that his brother was James, that he was called Christ, that he was wise and virtuous, that he had disciples, that he was condemned to death by crucifixion at the hands of Pilate, and that he appeared to have risen three days later.<sup>4</sup>

And there are also references which attest to the effect that Jesus had on people or the time. For example, Pliny the Younger (a lawyer and Roman governor of Bithynia) in his *Letters* wrote about how, under the threat of death, he cross-examined the disciples of

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<sup>4</sup> Flavis Josephus, the so-called *Testimonium Flavinium* - two passages: *Jewish Antiquities*, 18.3.3 and 20. 9. 1 – dated A.D. 93.

Jesus and whether they thought Jesus was indeed ‘a god’. Their affirmation would lead to their execution!<sup>5</sup>

Suetonius (a Roman historian) wrote the histories of twelve successive Roman rulers and when writing about Emperor Claudius mentioned that Jewish Christians in Rome caused disturbances at the instigation of ‘Chrestus’.<sup>6</sup>

Tacitus (a senator under Emperor Vaspasian and governor of Asia) wrote about the fire that destroyed Rome in A.D. 64 and how the then Emperor Nero had blamed it on the Christians – those who followed ‘Christus’ a man who had been put to death during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of the procurator Pontius Pilate.<sup>7</sup>

These external sources all help to attest to the reliability of the New Testament accounts about Jesus, his life, ministry and impact.

Those factors that would be helpful in establishing the truth of an event today, are all factors we can look too when trying to establish the truth of the Bible records.

We are on firm historical ground when we pay attention to the Bible.

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<sup>5</sup> Plinius Secundus, *Epistulae* X.96 – dated around A.D. 112.

<sup>6</sup> Gaius Suetonius Tranquillas, *The Twelve Caesars (De Vita Caesarum): Life of Claudius* – dated around A.D. 120.

<sup>7</sup> Cornelius Tacitus, *Annals* - dated around A.D. 116.